

Benefactor's Sugar Loaf Preserve Complete But for a Few Slices

By Sterling Seagrave
Staff Reporter

Gordon Strong's remarkable ambition to buy a mountain and give it to the people is now almost complete, ten years after his death.

Sugar Loaf Mountain, standing like a sentinel out of the rolling plain of Upper Montgomery County, is now owned entirely by Stronghold Incorporated, except for several slivers of land retained by local people.

One of the last pieces missing from Strong's great dream was deeded over to "Stronghold" in the final week of December. The trustees of Strong's corporation are understood to be negotiating quietly and patiently for the other sections that will make the dream complete.

Nearly 50,000 people visit Sugar Loaf Mountain each year. They come upon the sentinel peak in much the same way Strong did in 1899.

Today, an hour out of Washington on the new Interstate Rte. 70-S brings you in sight of the mountain. It rises abruptly from the plain, covered with timber half naked in the winter, a glistening white mantle covering its sides.

No other hills adjoin it. Sugar Loaf is a geological anomaly. Turning from the super highway at the Rte. 109 interchange, turning again in the small farm and antique town of Comus onto Rte. 95, you arrive in Strong's quaint little village of Stronghold, ringed by rail fences and trees.

Here the care that Strong exerted in preparing his mountain for the public is evident. There are small

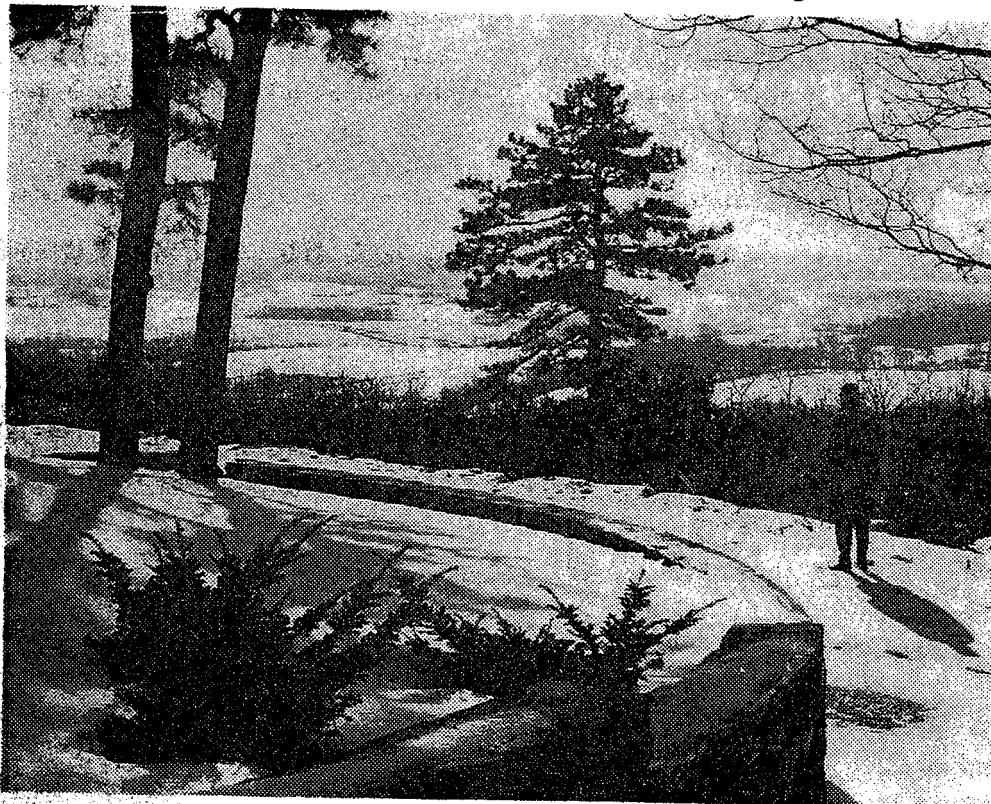
lettered signs, unobtrusively telling the rules of the mountain and directing the visitor up the mountainside.

The road is paved, but narrow and winding.

Covered now with a light, crusted blanket of snow, the road sweeps steeply up past the Georgian mansion Strong built for himself and his wife on the first low shoulder of the mountain.

Still farther up, the visitor comes upon the first major lookout. Crafted in native stone and mortar, it looks out over Montgomery County far below and the rolling farm lands, stretching back toward Washington.

At the next lookout, a stone circle which looks as if it was built by the Druids, you can see White's Ford on the far Potomac, where Lee's Army splashed across. Two bronze 12-pound Civil War guns stand on the lookout facing White's Ford.



This is the view to the south from a point halfway up Sugar Loaf Mountain.

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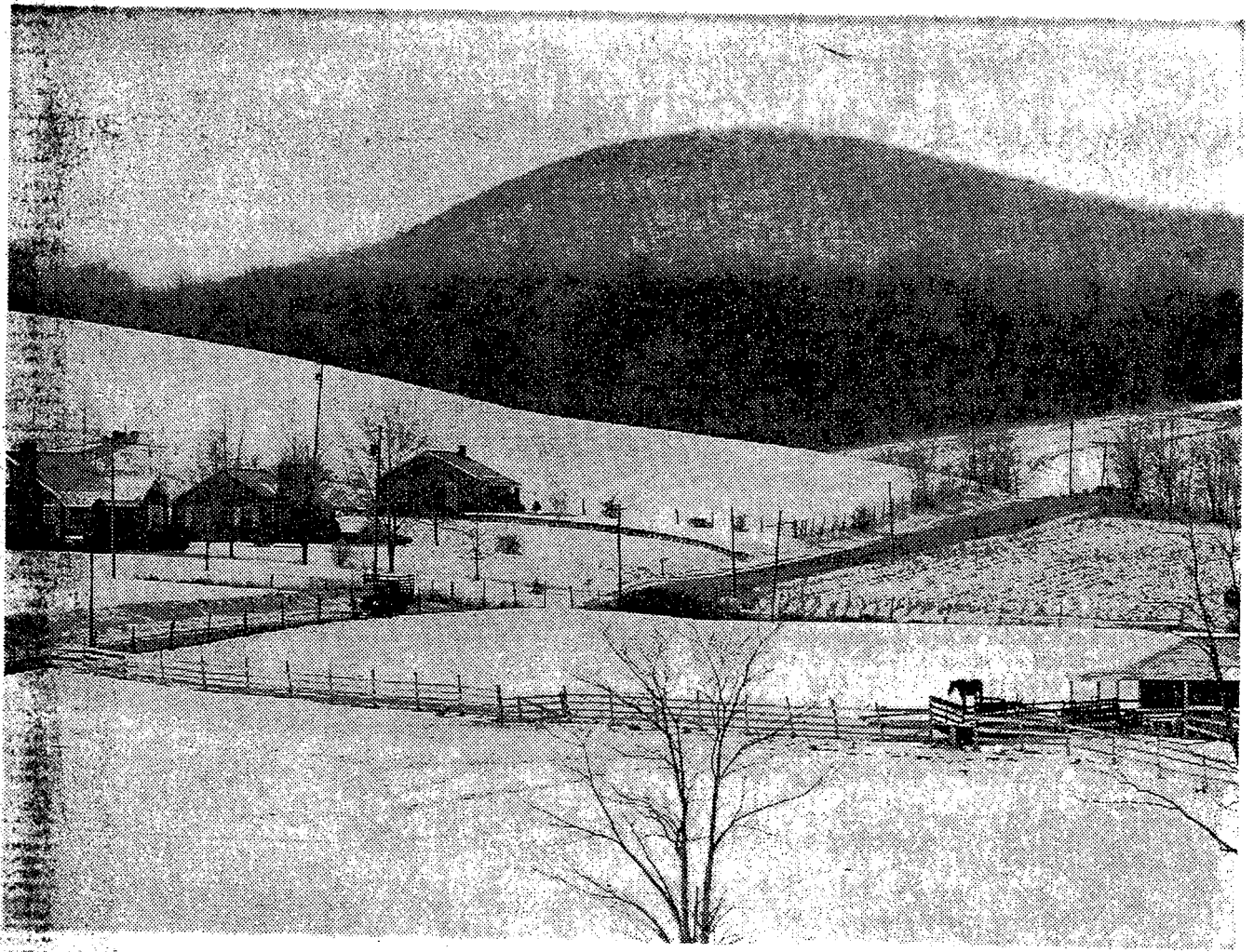
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Members of the Christian Brothers Order of LaSalle College, Philadelphia, engage in a winter sport atop Sugar Loaf.



Sugar Loaf Mountain rises above the Maryland countryside in this view from Rte. 70S, which leads to Washington.

Strong's Dream of Giving Mountain to Public A Legacy of Years

"That's to keep the Johnnies from coming across again," Strong once said.

The road winds upward for nearly a mile. Then you come to the most impressive lookout, where a massive structure of boulders, resembling a powder magazine, shelters picnic tables of rough hewn logs and provides a staggering view of Frederick County and the Catoctin Mountains in the blue-hazed distance.

Here Strong provided parking areas, discreetly bulldozed from the rugged hillside. And here a footpath of logs and flag rock leads up through giant boulders toward the crest, 1281 feet above sea level.

Reaching the summit, you find a flat, wooded area flanked by rocky points where you may balance tentatively on the edge of the sheer precipice, the wind

howling, inhaling a view that sweeps from Baltimore to Washington.

Children and the elderly appreciate the view the most, it is said. That perhaps explains why Strong felt such a dominating urge to protect this mountain as a sanctuary.

Almost 3000 acres have been accumulated by Stronghold, which has been under the supervision of Donald A. McCormack of Riggs Bank since Strong's death.

The non-profit corporation was formed in 1946. When Strong died in 1954, his will made the mountain a formal gift to the public.

Rustic, almost Gothic in its solitary, boulder-strewn grandeur, Sugar Loaf Mountain stands as a symbol of a man who found something too good and too big to keep to himself.



Staff Photos by Wally McNamee

This stairway eases the descent on Sugar Loaf.